# What is narrative?

# Three definitions of narrative via the *Oxford English Dictionary*

- A spoken or written account of connected events; a story.
- The practice or art of telling stories.
- A representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values.

# Narrative is writing that connects ideas, concepts or events. The definitions below show three important aspects of narration in storytelling:

- It **connects** events, showing their patterns, relating them to each other or to specific ideas, themes or concepts.
- It is a **practice** and **art** in that when we tell a story, we shape the narrative – the connection between events.
- **Narrating a story** involves **shaping events around an overarching set of aims or effects** (whether consciously or unconsciously). For example, in a comedic narrative, the overarching aim is to surprise/shock or otherwise lead the audience or reader to be amused.

# Common types of narrative:

- Descriptive narrative
- Viewpoint narrative
- Historical narrative
- Linear narrative
- Non-linear narrative

# Descriptive narrative

- Descriptive narrative connects imagery, ideas, and details to convey a sense of time and place.
- **The purpose of descriptive narrative**
- To create a sense of setting, of time and place.
- To convey the mood and tone of said time and place (e.g. threatening, peaceful, cheerful, chaotic).

# When we use descriptive narrative

- When we describe a pastoral scene in a rural setting, for example, we might linger on specific images (such as a wide, empty field, an abandoned tractor) to build up an overarching mood (such as peaceful simplicity).

# Descriptive narrative examples

- The Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a master of this type of narration. In *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), the third person narrator describes the unnamed seaside city in the Carribbean where much of the novel takes place. Marquez narrates the passage through the eyes of Dr. Urbino, one of the city's most distinguished doctors:
- Over the course of two pages, Marquez masterfully shows the city's mood, culture, unique spirit. His narration then zooms in closer on individuals' lives. The multiple time-scales in his narrative – past and present day – combine to give a rich sense of time and place.

# Viewpoint narrative

- Often, the express purpose of a section of narration is to help us understand the views and feelings of the narrating character or ‘viewpoint narrator’. Point of view or POV is thus a key element of narration

# The purpose of viewpoint narrative

- Viewpoint narrative presents events or scenes to us **so that we see understand them through narrators’ feelings, desires, beliefs or values.**

- Viewpoint narrative has power. We might interpret story events the way the narrator does. Because we don’t have a different viewpoint for comparison, or because their voice is strong, self-assured. Yet the viewpoint narrator in a scene may be unreliable (they could lie about what truly happened, or gloss over details that, for example, make them look worse to others).

# Viewpoint narrative example

- Virginia Woolf is a master of filtering events via individual characters' perceptions. She often switches between multiple characters' viewpoints within a single page. This approach (called 'stream of consciousness') lets her reveal characters' different fixations and personalities.

- Take, for example, this scene in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Septimus Smith is a World War I veteran whose mental health is crumbling.  His Italian wife Rezia feels unease and longs for her home country. Woolf switches from paragraph to paragraph between Septimus and Rezia’s viewpoints, in third person:
- Human nature, in short, was on him – the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him. Dr. Holmes came quite regularly every day.Once you stumble, Septimus wrote on the back of a postcard, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you. Their only chance was to escape, without letting Holmes know; to Italy – anywhere, anywhere, away from Dr. Holmes.

- Woolf’s gift for narrative means that she can narrate individuals’ fears and obsessions within a single page without breaking the flow. Woolf reports Rezia’s words within narration, instead of using dialogue. This allows Woolf’s narrative (and changing viewpoints) to flow into each other without interruption.

# Historical narrative

- In genres such as biography, autobiography and various historical subgenres (e.g. historical romance or WWII fiction), a lot of narration recounts events in the past. Of course, the author may choose to tell a war story in a tumultuous present tense. There's no *single* way to narrate the past. Yet it serves a common purpose:
- One thing common to historical narrative in different genres is it shows historical process. It links causation from event to event, showing the chain reactions that lead to how things pan out.

# Linear narrative

- Linear narrative is narration where you tell events in the order they happened, i.e. in sequence. This type of narrative is typical of realist fiction where the author wants to create the sense of a life unfolding as a character experiences day to day or year to year.

# The purpose of linear narrative

- Linear narrative shows causation clearly. When we see what happened to a character yesterday, then today, then tomorrow, its often easier to notice patterns and chains of cause and effect.
- Stories told in a linear time-frame might be told mainly using past, present, or even future tense. Yet each event flows on simply from the previous incident described. Often this helps to create what Will Self calls ‘the texture of lived life’, as we see characters going through this, then that, then the next thing.

# Example of linear narrative

- David Mitchell's genre-bending *Cloud Atlas* (2004) spans multiple eras, settings and characters, and is nonlinear as a whole. Yet one section of his book, titled 'Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery' is written as a mystery/thriller. This section in itself is linear narrative, told in the present tense.

- The linear chain of events – feeling uneasy and ill at a party, getting sick – occur on a simple timeline of 'this happens, then that'.

# Nonlinear narrative

- Different types of narrative include narration that does not follow events in the order they happened.
- *Chronological* events (e.g. what happens in 1990 followed by what happens in 1991) don’t have to match up with the order of *narrative* events. The author might share key details from 1990 before going back to the events of 1987 in the story.

- However, as novel writing coach Romy Sommer says, avoid making the first several chapters of your novel all backstory:
- An issue I see with a lot of beginner writers is they tend to write the backstory as the story itself. If you do find yourself writing the first few chapters being all about the backstory [...] you may need to ditch the first few chapters.

# The purpose of non-linear narrative

- Non-linear narrative has various uses:
- **It can represent the narrator's emotional state or consciousness.** For example, a severely traumatized narrator who has flashbacks might tell events in a jumble of chapters set in different years, out of sequence, as they try to piece together fragments and memories.
- **It can show stories with related arcs or themes unfolding in different places and times.** In Michael Cunningham's retelling (of a sort) of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, characters living in different time periods have personal experiences and tragedies that echo events from Woolf's book as well as Woolf's own life.
- **It can build suspense.** For example, Donna Tartt opens *The Secret History* by telling the reader about a murder. We next meet the murder victim alive, as the story jumps back to the events leading to his killing.

# Example of nonlinear narrative

- Donna Tartt's prologue to *The Secret History* (1992) is a masterful piece of non-linear narration. Within the first page, we know there's been a murder and the first person narrator is somehow complicit. Tartt's opening paragraph reveals a lot but still builds anticipation:
- The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He'd been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history – state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate New York, as far away as Boston.' (p. 1)

- Yet next thing we know, we’re back in the days when the narrator first met Bunny, and Bunny Corcoran is very much alive. This non-linear recalling of events gives us a dramatic moment before its buildup. Yet Tartt still delays our complete gratification by making us wait for full understanding of what happened, and why.

# Use examples of narrative to improve your own narration

- **Write a paragraph of historical narrative** describing a character's home city and how it has changed over the years. In the next paragraph, describe how a character or section of the population spends a typical weekend in the city, showcasing more of the city's unique details.
- **Write a scene using viewpoint narrative** showing two characters preoccupied with different worries, in the third person. Write the scene entirely in narration. Any speech must be reported speech and not dialogue. For example: 'He told her that he was tired of the city and was thinking about moving abroad.' In the first half, filter narration through the first character's thoughts, but then switch to the other character's point of view. How do they see things differently?